



Second National Herbs, Native Foods and Essential Oils Conference

16 – 18 August, Lismore, NSW

**A report for the Rural Industries Research
and Development Corporation**

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Foreword

Customers from the retail, service, fast food, and manufacturing industries in Australia and overseas are showing an increasing interest in Australian-grown herbs, spices and native foods.

The potential for growth in the Australian herb, spice and native food industries is highlighted by a number of positive trends.

About 57% of Australians now use alternative medicines especially medicinal herb products and there is significant potential for medicinal herb exports.

The alternative medicine market in Japan, the US and Europe is worth billions of dollars.

As well, people are using culinary herbs and spices more often to enhance meals.

The increasing diversity in meals and the development of innovative value-added products like frozen and fresh pre-packs also increases the prospects for culinary herbs.

An estimated \$25m worth of herbs are imported into Australia each year, and for culinary herbs alone, import substitution to the value of \$5m is a target of the local industry.

Native foods or bushfoods (nut, berries, fruits, spices, vegetables and herb) are also considered to have the potential to be a significant force on the food scene as a new and novel cuisine that is already capturing the attention of leading Australian and overseas food industry representatives and consumers.

Given the complexity of the industries (there are 3000 known medicinal herbs and over 200 herb and spice crops grown for culinary purposes) a market-focussed approach to production is essential.

Australia's sustainable management of natural resources, diversity of climate, good infrastructure, sound farm management and a 'clean green' image are clear marketing benefits.

It is vital that growers understand the product specifications of customers and build long-term relationships to develop both the local and export markets.

For landholders who are dedicated, committed and willing to put in the 'hard yards' to develop the production base for herb, spice and native food industries in Australia, the conference at Lismore on the 16-18 August provided an ideal opportunity to become acquainted with some of these new crop opportunities.

Registrants learnt more about the industry, markets, marketing, getting started and products.

The conference also provided networking opportunities through interaction with industry associations, leading representatives and researchers.

Acknowledgments

The conference was a major cooperative effort and the planning committee is sincerely grateful to RIRDC, NSW Agriculture, Lismore Unlimited, chairpersons, guest speakers and the landholders who kindly allowed registrants to visit their farms.

Special thanks goes to Mr Steven Muldoon, NSW Agriculture.

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Executive summary

The 2nd National Herb, Native Foods and Essential Oils Conference was held at Lismore, NSW, on August 16th to 18th, 2001.

The conference focussed on future directions for these emerging industries, revealed the commercial realities of growing these crops across Australia, and provided industry and prospective growers with a thorough update.

The Australian herb, essential oils and native food industries have an agenda to be world leaders in production, value adding and marketing.

These small but growing industries with support from the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation are focussed on developing Australia's market share and presence, especially overseas, by maintaining consistent quality and reliability of supply and developing new opportunities.

The Australian industries are dedicated and committed and have many favourable attributes that auger well for the future. Prospective growers and industry need to be aware that the marketplace is dynamic and competitive.

The national conference provided interaction between industry sectors, information, a refocus of direction, improved understanding of the industries and an effective targeting of resources.

Keynote speakers from industry associations and manufacturing and marketing bodies provided a varied approach, from research outcomes to hands-on experience during farm visits.

The conference, organised by NSW Agriculture and Lismore Unlimited was part of industry activity and celebrations for the inaugural Northern Rivers Herb Festival.

The Northern Rivers region of NSW is rapidly gaining an international identify associated with herbs and natural products.

The Herb Festival provided various key events and activities to a diverse market, with a focus on educating farmers about the benefits of growing herbs and the current state of the industry.

Introduction

The herbs, essential oils and native foods industries are characterised by complexity due to a high number of commodities, small domestic grower base and a lack of peak body organisation for growers.

There is a need to update growers on the market opportunities and the most up to date technologies.

The markets are developing in Australia and overseas and the Australian grower base needs to be developed, well organised and informed if they are to meet the product specifications of buyers.

Technology transfer, technology adoption and research to practice is initiated efficiently by group activities such as the conference held at Lismore, 16-18 August 2001.

Objectives

Objectives for this project were:

- i. To convene a national conference in association with industry.
- ii. To develop grower awareness of profitable technologies.
- iii. To facilitate industry development and update industry with the latest research and development.

Methodology

- i. Consult industry and R & D service providers.
- ii. Form planning committee (January 2001)
- iii. Convene conference at Lismore NSW, 16th-18th August 2001.
- iv. Provide proceedings of conference for future reference
- v. Report to RIRDC.
- vi. Survey registrants to assess potential/future needs/importance of conference.

Results

- i. The outcomes of this project were:
- ii. Improved technology transfer and research to practice, networking and organisation of the grower base.
- iii. Comprehensive reference proceedings were published.
- iv. Improved understanding of industries and direction.

Discussion (with comments by Ian Hemphill)

More than 120 registrants from NSW and interstate attended the conference

A wide range of topics were covered and although at the outset some speakers felt they were allotted insufficient time to make their presentations, the result was generally more focused than has been seen at similar gatherings in the past. With this style of conference much of the groundwork can be laid so that participants with particular areas of interest are then in a position to conduct their own follow-up research.

By the end of the first day there appeared to be some consensus that the industry lacked structure. However, with such a wide range of diverse interests it also became apparent that it would be difficult to form a peak industry body that would objectively represent an umbrella of common interest.

Participants gained useful information from those who had experienced both successes and failures.

Realistic overviews and marketing options were presented by the speakers.

Potential growers gained an insight into the depth of commitment required for success.

It was apparent that the industry has grown and become more organised since the conference at Tocal six years ago.

The broad consensus was that conferences such as this provided an invaluable resource for networking and information gathering for all interested parties. The practical benefits from such events seems to be greater than trying to focus the energies of a handful of people in establishing a peak industry body. An aim tried after Tocal that did not succeed.

The field visits were well supported and valuable for registrants.